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*Gonzalo Vázquez Orbaiceta**

Project 33: The NAVPLAN and the Future of the US Navy

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Abstract:

The current Chief of Naval Operations in the U.S. Navy, Admiral Lisa Franchetti, published in late September 2024 the new Naval Plan for the Navy. Focused on preparing the Navy for war with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) by 2027, the new plan seeks to address the different problems currently faced by the Navy, as well as to maximize the performance of each and every component of the service (manpower, capabilities and logistics). However, in the midst of an increasingly competitive and challenging maritime environment, successfully achieving the goals set forth in the new plan will require notable effort and dedication. In light of this, it is convenient to put into perspective the place where the Navy stands today, examining its antecedents and its future projection.

Keywords:

US Navy, naval power, maritime strategy, China, DMO.

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«The Chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has told his forces to be ready for war by 2027—we will be more ready»

Lisa M. Francheti, 2024

«The United States cannot function as a world power unless she is a great sea power»

Colin Gray, 1992

Introduction

The importance of the sea for the security and prosperity of nations, far from losing its prominence in international relations, has been gaining increasing international attention. As today's highly interconnected global society has become increasingly dependent on the sea for its functioning, the strategic importance of the use and exploitation of its resources has been consolidated as one of the central pillars of the current international economic order. A quick glance at some of today's most prominent conflict hotspots reveals a maritime component in all of them.

In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, naval warfare in the Black Sea has become a scenario of significant technological advances in naval technology, with the extensive use of unmanned surface vessels (USVs) which has allowed Kiev to dispute Russia's control of the sea. Maritime trade in the region has been severely affected by the strife, causing major setbacks to the flow of trade in grain and other products on which many developing countries depend.

As a result of the conflict in the Gaza Strip between Israel and its regional adversaries, the Red Sea, one of the world's most important shipping lanes (connecting the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea) has become a high-risk area for global maritime traffic. The Houthi rebels, materially supported by Tehran, have succeeded in sinking or damaging numerous ships over the last eight months, eventually leading to the deployment of two multinational naval operations: *Operation Prosperity Guardian* (led by the United States) and *Operation Aspides* (launched by the European Union).

In the Indo-Pacific, a region bound to become the center of gravity of the global economy (many would argue it already is), the stability of the regional order is constantly threatened by territorial disputes (mostly maritime) between the PRC and its neighboring countries – Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and Malaysia, among others. Moreover, Chinese leader Xi Jinping's ambition to incorporate Taiwan into the PRC –

something he has instructed his military to try to achieve by 2027– makes this region another potential focus of conflict.

Against this backdrop, the United States and its allies are faced with the need to significantly strengthen their naval (and maritime) capabilities in order to preserve stability and order at sea, after several decades of reduced investments and a notable decline in the size of their navies.[1] With the publication of the U.S. Navy's new Naval Plan (henceforth NAVPLAN), which echoes the situation just described very clearly, this article seeks to analyze the contents of the document and the historical context in which it is framed. To do so, aside from the contents of the document, it also examines some aspects related to its recent past (the late stages of the Cold War) and the Navy's future projection in the medium term.

Strategic Context Overview

The U.S. Navy is publishing the NAVPLAN at a very delicate time at the strategic level, something that, as will be seen later on, is clearly reflected throughout the pages of the document.

Firstly, the strategic situation at sea has undergone a radical change with the return to great power competition. As the Cold War came to an end in 1990, Washington emerged as the only maritime power with global power projection capability, based on the Navy's ability to secure control of the sea wherever was needed. This was confirmed almost immediately, when Iraq decided to invade Kuwait in August 1990. Saddam Hussein's move prompted a massive deployment in response led by the US Navy, which began in the early hours of January 17, 1991, and in which the Spanish Navy (Armada) also made some contributions.[2] During the course of *Operation Desert Storm* (the second phase of the Gulf War that followed Operation Desert Shield), the Americans deployed six aircraft carriers in the waters of the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, supported by the full range of

[1] See: VÁZQUEZ, Gonzalo «Sailing Rough Seas: NATO's Maritime Posture», Opinion Paper, *IEEE bulletin*, 11 March 2024, 947-967. Available at: https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/b/o/boletin_ieee_33_.pdf (Accessed 29 September 2024).

[2] See: ENRECH DE ACEDO, José Luís, «Zippo Uno», *Revista General de Marina*, tomo 284, May 2023, 717-732. Available at: https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8947114&orden=0&info=link (Accessed 28 September 2024).

U.S. and allied naval platforms –highlighting, once again, the inherent flexibility that naval power has.

While it is true that, as Vice Admiral Stan Arthur, then commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, would point out shortly afterwards, part of the resounding success was due to «modern port infrastructures, large and numerous airfields, and an enemy whose army did not really believe in its mission»,[3] the massive deployment, which saw the debut of the Tomahawk land attack missiles (TLAMs), is certainly a relevant event in the history of joint aeronaval operations. Moreover, as the current crisis in the Red Sea has shown, it is something for which neither Washington nor its allies have the will or the capability to do today.

While Operation Prosperity Guardian has managed to escort a large number of merchant ships and Europe's Operation Aspides has done something similar, both interventions are far from resembling the 1991 deployment of force (which was eminently focused on achieving a certain result on land). The U.S. Navy has decreased considerably in size, as have the navies of most of its allies; at the same time, the «democratization» of defensive capabilities gathered under the concept of Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), now deployed by groups such as the Houthis (supported by Tehran), has meant that control of the sea can no longer be taken for granted.

Almost simultaneously, the rapid growth of the Chinese navy in Southeast Asia, which is already the largest in the world in terms of number of platforms (something which, although far from being decisive, is a factor to be taken into account), has as its central objective seizing control of the sea in the region and, should this not be possible, deny access to it to the Americans and their allies as much as possible. Over the past twelve years, Beijing has made more than significant investments to equip its navy and coast guard (and maritime militia) with the appropriate means and the best training possible for high-intensity naval warfare. Although, for obvious reasons, China is still far from becoming a global maritime power (there is no consensus on whether this is the goal they are pursuing), it has the support of A2/AD capabilities to rely on and complement its firepower.

[3] ARTHUR, Stan & POKRANT, Marvin, «The Storm at Sea», *USNI Proceedings*, Vol. 117/5/1,059, Mayo 1991. Available at: https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1991/may/storm-sea (Accessed 28 September 2024).

This development has been made possible by the complementary growth of another fundamental element of naval power: the industrial base needed to build ships and sustain them throughout their operational life. In this respect, the Southeast Asian region is already the leading naval industrial power –and will continue to be in the foreseeable future. Between China, Japan and South Korea, they account for a major part of the total tonnage launched annually, including both warships and merchant ships.[4] In contrast, the shipbuilding industry in NATO countries suffers from the lack of qualified personnel in the shipyards, which are, at the same time, not enough for the current strategic needs, and is thus lagging behind.

In the case of the Americans, in addition to the disappointment of the *Littoral Combat Ship* (LCS) program, of which several units have been already decommissioned after less than a decade in service, the case of the future *Constellation-class* frigates (a project that was finally awarded to BAE Systems to the detriment of Navantia's proposal) has received wider attention internationally. The new frigates were initially supposed to be based on the European FREMMs operated by France and Italy. However, successive changes in the design have turned the future class into a completely different platform, one which bears very little resemblance with the original design which was initially sought. At the same time, the lack of qualified personnel and sufficient shipyards in the United States has also prompted numerous delays in the program, of which the first unit will not be commissioned before 2029 (three years later than initially expected).[5]

The submarine fleet is in a very similar position. As retired U.S. Navy Captain Jerry Hendrix underscored, only a single boat is scheduled to be delivered within budgets in 2025. «Additionally, of the submarine force already in commission, sixteen of those forty-nine boats— or nearly a third of the Navy's premier offensive force—are in drydocks or tied to piers, lacking required dive certifications», he ascertains.[6] Given that the U.S.

[4] KANG, Choi & LEE, Peter K. «Why U.S. Naval Power needs Asian Allies», *War on the Rocks*, 12 January 2024. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2024/01/why-u-s-naval-power-needs-asian-allies/ (Accessed 29 September 2024).
[5] See: CONTE DE LOS RÍOS, Augusto, «Fragatas clase Constellation: ¿Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada?», *Revista Ejércitos*, 5 June 2024. Available at: https://www.revistaejercitos.com/opinion/fragatas-clase-constellation-cronica-de-una-muerte-anunciada/ (Accessed 28 September 2024).
[6] HENDRIX, Jerry, «Sunk at Pier: Crisis in the American Submarine Industrial Base», *American Affairs Journal*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2024. Available at: https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2024/05/sunk-at-the-pier-crisis-in-the-american-submarine-industrial-base/ (Accessed 28 September 2024).

submarine force is one of the Navy's most important tools, the poor state of the fleet and the lack of sufficient shipyards to provide adequate maintenance of the units in service means that the construction of the future *Columbia-class* (SSBN strategic submarines to replace the *Ohio-class*) and the program to replace the Virginia class attack submarines have also suffered delays.

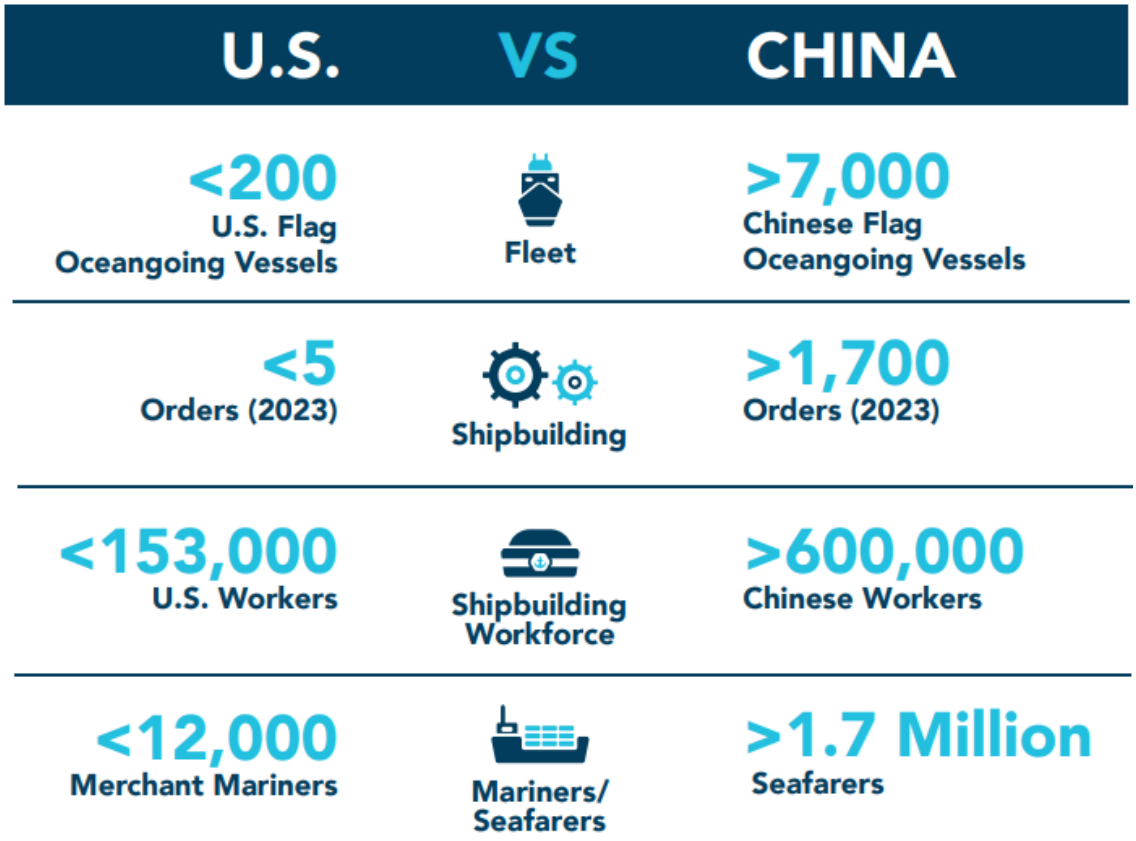

Figure 1: Comparison of U.S. and China shipbuilding industries (Source: Waltz, Kelly, Rubio & Garamendi, 2024).[7]

In broad terms, these are some of the biggest challenges Admiral Lisa Franchetti has encountered since she took over as Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) in August 2023. The U.S. Navy faces a strategic landscape in which control of the sea is no longer guaranteed, and the possibility of conflict with its antagonist in Southeast Asia looms ever closer. More than ever, the United States needs a new push to strengthen its maritime power (which encompasses not only the navy, but also its merchant marine and auxiliary fleet, an industry capable of supporting them, and the logistical base necessary to

[7] WALTZ et al. «Congressional Guidance for a National Maritime Strategy», *United States Congress*, 30 April 2024. Available at: https://www.kelly.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Congressional-Guidance-for-a-National-Maritime-Strategy.pdf.

coordinate all efforts). NAVPLAN 2024 is conceived under such premise.

NAVPLAN 2024

«This Navigation Plan is my strategic guidance to the Navy, building on that vision and picking up where the 2022 Navigation Plan left off», opens Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the U.S. Navy's current Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) in the 2024 NAVPLAN.[8] The United States is faced with the need to take a step to the front in order to resolve the numerous issues that have been deteriorating its readiness over the past several decades, while preparing for the possibility of a conflict with China's navy in 2027. Although such a scenario has been talked about for many years, as highlighted by the concept of «the Davidson Window» coined a few years ago, we have not encountered many such direct statements of intent until now:

> The Chairman of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has told his forces to be ready for war by 2027—we will be more ready. The challenge posed by the PRC to our Navy now goes well beyond just the size of the PLA Navy fleet […] The PRC's defense industrial base is on a wartime footing, including the world's largest shipbuilding capacity now at the hands of the PLA navy.[9]

The NAVPLAN makes it clear that preparation for a hypothetical war scenario like that will be the center of gravity of the Navy's work from this moment on. The document, not very long, is structured in three different sections: «Why the Update»; «How we Fight»; and «How we Accelerate». The two main strategic ends defined by it are «readiness for the possibility of war with the People's Republic of China by 2027 and enhancing the Navy's long-term advantage». Both comprise what the plan describes as its «north star», upon which the rest is articulated: «By 2027, the Navy will be more ready for sustained combat as part of a Joint and Combined force, prioritizing the People's Republic of China as the pacing challenge and focusing on enabling the Joint warfighting ecosystem».[10]

To fulfill such vision, seven key objectives are established –the ways– to enhance the

[8] «Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan for America's Warfighting Navy 2024», September 2024, ii. Available at: https://www.navy.mil/Leadership/Chief-of-Naval-Operations/CNO-NAVPLAN-2024/ (Accessed 28 September 2024).
[9] NAVPLAN, 6.
[10] Ibid, 6, 19.

preparation of the naval force by 2027:

1. Ready our Platforms (achieve and sustain an 80 percent combat surge ready posture for ships, submarines, and aircraft);
2. Operationalize Robotic and Autonomous Systems (integrate proven robotic and autonomous systems for routine use by the commanders who will employ them);
3. Fight from the MOC (have ready MOCs certified and proficient in command and control, information, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment functions in all fleet headquarters);
4. Recruit and Retain Talent (achieve 100% rating fill for the Navy active and reserve components, man our deploying units to 95% of billets authorized, and fill 100% of strategic depth mobilization billets);
5. Deliver Quality of Service (eliminate involuntary living aboard ships in homeport);
6. Invest in Warfighter Competency (have reliable, realistic, relevant, and recordable LVC-enabled architectures to train Navy warfighters); and
7. Restore our Critical Infrastructure (generate, sustain, and posture the force for the fight).[11]

Overall, the document stresses a unitary vision for the entire service, one that provides a strong purpose to drive its efforts during the next few years. «Why we fight has not changed, but how we fight has, which must inform what we fight with».[12]

Also worthy of consideration is the acknowledgement that the Navy does not fight on its own, but rather, as part of an ecosystem in which the contribution of each part is vital for its overall success. As such, interoperability with other services and with their European and Asian allies also underlies the vision of the NAVPLAN. They U.S. Navy is no longer able to cope with the entire plethora of challenges on its own. Thus, while recognizing that the need to grow the fleet will take some years, and a «3-5% sustained budget growth above inflation» to do so, the role of their allies also plays a relevant part in the successful attainment of Project 33's goals.

On broad terms, the NAVPLAN has been well received in the naval circles of Washington. It underscores a series of objectives which are without a doubt ambitious, and evidently,

[11] Ibid, 19-23.
[12] Ibid, 13.

will be hard to attain. Placing China as the main antagonist adds a higher sense of purpose to the document, something fundamental for any strategy. «Trying to design a force without an antagonist in view, or without a war plan to vanquish that antagonist, was like 'trying to design a machine tool without knowing whether it is going to manufacture hair pins or locomotives'», argues *U.S. Naval War College* Professor James Holmes quoting U.S. Navy Captain Harry Yarnell.[13]

Especially significant is the document's emphasis on the fact that «asymmetric sea denial" is among the core capabilities that the Navy must hone for a hypothetical conflict by 2027. Traditionally, the Navy has not operated in the defensive, but has rather sough the offensive (particularly in decisive moments, as during the latter stages of the Cold War against the USSR). Thus, for Admiral Franchetti herself to underscore the need to seek an asymmetric sea denial remains quite a statement. «The Navigation Plan, then, seems to admit the unsettling reality that the Navy will be weaker than its major foe at the outset of a Pacific contest of arms. It's jarring for America's top uniformed naval officer to confess that in writing», Holmes continues.[14]

Although generally positive, the NAVPLAN still lacks more depth and detail in some of the aspects it discusses. In terms of logistics or the naval industrial base (which are mentioned later on in this article) the document fails to elaborate further on the precise needs derived. It mentions on several instances the paramount necessity of improving the maritime industry to support the Navy's general preparation, albeit it is still immersed in the construction of a fleet geared towards high-intensity naval warfare with big and expensive platforms and systems.[15] When it comes to seeking a positive balance between high-end and low-end capabilities, the development of platforms comprising the latter category seems like a good opportunity to reduce the high costs that the former entail, so that financial resources to the Navy can be used more efficiently.

It seems obvious, then, that while the ambition reflected in the plan is high, the efforts and

[13] HOLMES, James «The Navy's New NavPlan sets its sights on China, from a sea denial stance», *USNI Proceedings*, Vol. 150/9/1,459, September 2024. Available at: https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/september/navys-new-navplan-sets-its-sights-china-sea-denial-stance?check_logged_in=1 (Accessed 29 September 2024).
[14] Ibid.
[15] CMS Editorial Board, «Assessing the 2024 Navigation Plan», *Center for Maritime Strategy*, 23 September 2024. Available at: https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/assessing-the-2024-navigation-plan/ (Accessed 28 September 2024).

dedication that will have to follow to make Project 33's vision a reality will have to be just as big, and will definitely put to the test Washington's willingness towards revamping its sea power. In spite of this, it is not the first time that they have had to do so, as the days of the Reagan administration (and several other instances) illustrate.

From the Cold War to DMO: The NAVPLAN in Perspective

The NAVPLAN must be understood as an element within a wider historical context. The very name Project 33 is precisely intended to frame the plan of Franchetti and his team in the historical trajectory of the navy, building on the work of her predecessors. Thus, at a time when it has already lost part of the capabilities that consolidated it as the great naval power immediately after the Cold War. Throughout the last three decades, a major part of those capabilities comes from the revolution that took place during the 1980s under Ronald Reagan's administration. But at the same time, as that heritage becomes increasingly diluted with the decommissioning of the platforms built back then, the U.S. Navy has been working for years to adapt its concept of operations to meet the threats posed by A2/AD systems and the prospects of increasingly challenging littorals. It is therefore useful to put the NAVPLAN in the context of its background, and the process of adaptation towards the new concept of Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) on which the Navy has been working on for years.

The Maritime Strategy and the Reagan Administration

As we have highlighted, the publication of NAVPLAN seems, at least on paper, an important turning point after almost two decades of setbacks and major failures. In this sense, the change that seems to be sought for the coming years is reminiscent of the change of direction that President Ronald Reagan instituted with his arrival at the White House in 1981. During the 1970s, the Soviet Union's navy, under the command of Admiral Sergei Gorshkov since 1956, had embarked on an ambitious shipbuilding plan to convert a navy subservient to the Red Army and limited to near-water operations into a blue-water navy capable of operating simultaneously in different maritime theaters (something that is in itself an imperative for Russia given its geographic configuration). The Cuban missile crisis in 1962 had exposed the navy's serious shortcomings when it came to deploying

«far from home», and allowed Gorshkov to forge ahead with his plan to rebuild the Soviet navy into a global force - which became a reality a decade later with the *Okean-70* (Russian for «ocean») large naval exercise.[16] This exercise would be repeated three more times over the following two decades, as well as several other large-scale exercise.

In response to the relatively little attention that the Nixon and Carter administrations had paid to the navy as a tool for defense against the USSR, the Reagan administration launched an ambitious plan to make the navy the spearhead of its policy against the Soviets. The culmination of its project was the so-called Maritime Strategy, which in turn served as the main argument for the Reagan administration's «600-ship navy». Thus, during the 1980s, the navy devoted major efforts to establishing a solid schedule of large-scale naval exercises, involving its Pacific and NATO allies, and, above all, conducting deployments farther up the GIUK Gap in waters the Soviets considered almost theirs – something that had not been done until then.

Some of the most significant programs originated during these years were the *Nimitz-class* aircraft carriers, the *Oliver Hazard-Perry-class* frigates (upon which the Navy's *F-80 Santa María-class* were based), or the *Arleigh Burke-class* destroyers (of which 73 units have already been built in different flights). Thus, through major investments in the navy, which reached the 600-ship navy target over several years (including 15 aircraft carriers with their respective task forces), and guided by the requirements that had been established thanks to the Maritime Strategy, which defined the maritime theaters where they were to focus their efforts and the means necessary for each of them, the Reagan administration made a substantial turnaround in the navy's trajectory. Although it is beyond the scope of this article, the study of the Maritime Strategy deserves significant attention today, given the many lessons it holds for helping to navigate the current strategic context at sea.

[16] OKEAN-70 was a naval exercise which took place during several months and in several maritime theaters simultaneously. It was the largest naval exercise in Soviet/Russian history until that point, and confirmed their ability to contest command of the sea to the U.S. Navy. The exercise had three additional iterations between then and 1985. Most recently, the Russian Navy conducted the first iteration of the exercise since the end of the Cold War, albeit with the participation of the PLA Navy and at a much smaller scale.

Concept for Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO)

On the other hand, the NAVPLAN comes at a time in which the U.S. Navy, faced with the evident proliferation of A2/AD capabilities mentioned above, needs to transform its concept of operations to meet the aforementioned threat. In particular, when thinking about a possible conflict in Southeast Asian waters against its antagonist in Beijing. To this end, the Navy, through entities such as the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), has been working for years on the concept of distributed lethality.

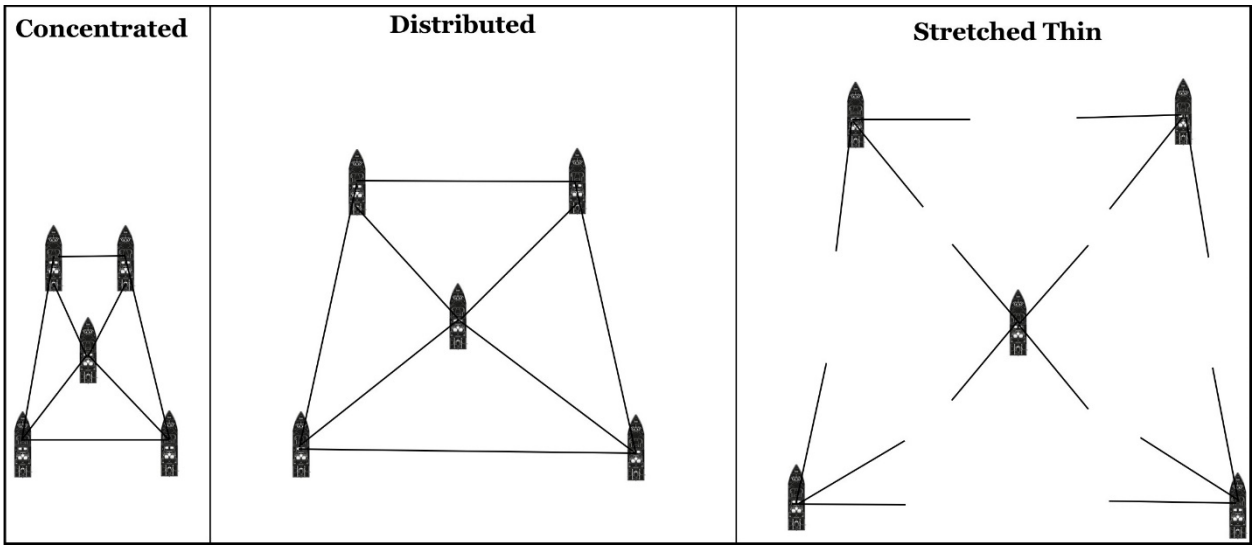

Figure 2: Difference between a concentrated, a distributed and a dispersed fleet (Source: Filipoff, 2023)

In essence, the aim is to complicate the adversary's ability to locate and attack targets in the fleet through a distribution of his units while maintaining the lethality of fire resulting from the combined capabilities of all of them. This has been embodied in its Distributed Maritime Operations concept.[17] Fundamentally, the DMO concept (illustrated in the figure below), arises «partly as a defensive reaction and partly as an offensive evolution», and under the premise that distribution is understood as «the ideal balance in the spread of capabilities».[18] It pursues a higher level of distribution so as to complicate a potential enemy's ability to target the fleet by multiplying the number of targets, while the vessels retain the ability to combine their aggregated fires on the enemy.

DMO, however, brings with it several tactical and operational challenges for the U.S.

[17] FILIPOFF, Dmitry «Fighting DMO, Pt. 1: Defining Distributed Maritime Operations and the Future of Naval Warfare», *CIMSEC*, 20 febrero 2023. Available at: https://cimsec.org/fighting-dmo-pt-1-defining-distributed-maritime-operations-and-the-future-of-naval-warfare/ (Accessed 28 September 2024).
[18] Ibid.

Navy, which will take several years to fully resolve for the proper implementation of the concept. Firstly, given the number of weapon systems the Navy has and the different types of missiles that it fields, each with its own technical peculiarities, coordinating them in time and space to converge on the selected target and saturate the adversary's defenses is highly complicated. At present, Washington does not have a homogeneous missile arsenal, which makes coordination extremely difficult, and, at the same time,

> US surface warships and submarines have very little anti-ship missile firepower. They only field a small number of short-range Harpoon missiles, which are inadequate for long-range, massed fires against warships. Their increase in firepower will come with the fielding of the Maritime Strike Tomahawk, which is compatible with their launch cells.[19]

Secondly, because a distributed fleet brings along, at the same time, a great need for logistical support in order to work efficiently. As the situation in the Red Sea has shown, in high-intensity naval warfare, the ability to resupply ships once they have exhausted their onboard arsenal (which, in a real high-intensity conflict, could happen in a few hours) is fundamental. At present, no navy is capable of resupplying without having to return to port, although the way to do so has been under study for years.

Therefore, to ensure the resupply of missiles, fuel and any other material, the work of the auxiliary fleet and the merchant marine is fundamental –but also a need that has been significantly neglected. As of today, Washington and several of its allies have a greatly reduced auxiliary fleet, while continuing to decommission units due to a lack of personnel to fill out their crews.[20] This poses some obstacles for the successful implementation of the DMO concept moving forward.

Such distributed lethality, on the other hand, is not unique to the U.S. Navy. Many allied navies, aware of the challenges that the proliferation of anti-ship capabilities presents to their ships, will also need to explore new operational concepts that involve a greater degree of distribution of their fleets. One option to facilitate this is the incorporation of new technologies and autonomous systems that allow larger and more valuable ships to stay

[19] FILIPOFF, Dmitry «Distributed Maritime Operations: Solving what problems and seizing which opportunities?», *Atlantic Council*, July 2024, 5. Available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Distributed-Maritime-Operations-Solving-what-problems-and-seizing-which-opportunities.pdf.

[20] «US and UK are sidelining Fleet Auxiliary Ships because of crew shortages», *The Maritime Executive*, 24 August 2024. Available at: https://maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-and-uk-are-sidelining-naval-auxiliary-ships-because-of-crew-shortages (Accessed 28 September 2024).

out of range of coastal artillery.[21] In that sense, the integration of unmanned vehicles into fleets (both UUVS, USVs and UAVs) is set to become one of the central tasks for many navies over the last few years, while exploring the appropriate ratio of manned to unmanned units to meet the particular needs of each navy.[22] Once again, the lack of material and human resources resulting from reduced investments in capabilities is an obstacle for many navies, and will create further problems in the future.

Final Considerations

In light of the several aspects outlined in this paper, it is worth underlining that the launch of Admiral Franchetti's NAVPLAN brings great promises for a Navy in search for reasserting its dominant status as the main maritime power with a real and serious global power projection ability. But just as the ambition and motivation that characterize Project 33, Washington has now an equally great challenge that will demand large investments sustained over a long period of time to be successfully implemented.

The plan is framed in a historical context of great changes for the Navy, which recognizes for the first time in a long time that in case of conflict against their Asian antagonist, they won't have the initial advantage. In fact, all the contrary: the Navy will have to first surpass the tyranny of distance to get to the main theater of operations, and once there, cope with an adversary which will enjoy the «home team advantage». Thus, the implicit effort of such a massive mobilization calls for the strengthening of such vital aspects as the auxiliary fleet, which, as the plan outlines, doesn't have the size nor the capabilities necessary to provide the support needed.

Looking at the current situation, and assuming great difficulty of strengthening the Navy's capabilities based on the current state of its naval industrial base, Washington has a major endeavor ahead. To guide its efforts, the experience provided by the days of the Reagan Administration and the Maritime Strategy of the 1980s offers valuable lessons to

[21] On the concept of distributed lethality, see also: HERRÁIZ GARCÍA, Fernando «Letalidad Distribuida», *Revista General de Marina*, December 2019, pp. 979-988. Available at: https://armada.defensa.gob.es/archivo/rgm/2019/12/rgmdic2019cap10.pdf (Accessed 29 September 2024).

[22] See: VV.AA «Vehículos Navales no Tripulados: A Modo de Introducción», *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Naval*, No. 37, 2024, 155-174. Available at: https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/p/e/pensamiento_naval_37.pdf (Accessed 28 September 2024).

observe. As former Navy Secretary John Lehman rightfully ascertained a few years ago:

> Our situation now parallels that of 1980, and our adversaries are actively seeking to take advantage of our weakness […] The experience of the 1980s demonstrates that a restoration of American command of the seas could reap 90 percent of the deterrent benefits of naval supremacy almost immediately.[23]

Thus, as Admiral Franchetti has instructed, the way forward is clear: all ahead flank. So it is for the rest of NATO navies.

*Gonzalo Vázquez Orbaiceta**
Centro de Pensamiento Naval
@GonzaloVzquezO1

[23] LEHMAN, John F. *Oceans Ventured: Winning Cold War at Sea* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), 283.